

Ambassador Richard Olson
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National University of Modern Languages (NUML)
As prepared

Thank you, Maj. Gen. Hasan, for your warm welcome remarks and to the National University of Modern Languages for hosting us today. I am honored to be here on the stage with Dr. Qureshi, Dr. Mukhtar Ahmad from the HEC, Dr. Amin from Quaid-i-Azam, and of course H.E. Ambassador Daoudzai and Foreign Secretary Jilani.

My talk today will primarily be focused on Afghanistan, and the challenges and opportunities we face beyond 2014. First, I must quibble with the title of this session - let me be clear, the United States is not leaving Afghanistan. 2014 is not an exit. The terms of engagement might change, but the commitment will not. It will be a continuation of a long-term commitment and engagement with the Afghan people.

And our relationship with Pakistan is not informed solely by our commitments and responsibilities in Afghanistan. The United States is committed to a cooperative and long-term partnership with Pakistan – far broader than any one issue, and centered on areas of mutual interest. It is not dictated solely by the requirements of today, but rooted in the joint realization that the security and prosperity of our peoples is better served when we remain engaged, and cooperate. Over the past several months, our governments have worked to put the difficulties of the recent past behind us, and to instead focus – with increased pragmatism – on the common challenges we both must face together.

Afghanistan

To begin our discussion of the future of Afghanistan, I must unequivocally dispel what I fear is a widespread, but wildly incorrect analogy: 2014 is not 1989. We recognize the mistakes of the past. The United States will not disengage from the region.

President Obama recently reiterated this message in the State of the Union address, in which he said: “We will build an enduring partnership with Afghanistan, so that it is never again a source of attacks against America.”

Afghanistan has changed

It is also important to note that Afghanistan is not the country it was a decade ago. We should not diminish the vast challenges this admittedly very poor and under-developed country continues to face, nor should we oversell what the international community and Afghan people have been able to accomplish. Yet, neither should we deny the advancement that has been achieved.

Afghanistan is an increasingly urban, substantially more connected country than ever before in its long history. Over two-thirds of Afghans now have access to mobile phones, up from almost none 12 years ago. Most now have access to television and radio. Eight times as many children are enrolled in school, one-third of them girls, and more than 10 times as many students attend university.

In the past 10 years, average life expectancy has increased by 16 years, from 44 to 60. This is in part due to the fact that 60% of Afghans now have access to basic health care, up from 9% in 2001. The maternal mortality rate has declined 80%.

Challenges remain, but I reiterate this is not the Afghanistan of thirty years ago, nor will the international community disengage and leave the Afghans alone to hold the ground claimed with such exertion, cost, and sacrifice. More important, Afghans themselves will not allow the reversal of history.

International Framework of Support for Afghanistan

To support the Afghan people in their efforts, at Bonn in December 2011, 85 countries and 15 international organizations announced a commitment to a “Transformation Decade” in Afghanistan through 2024. At the Chicago Summit, NATO and ISAF allies committed to provide \$3.6 billion dollars a year to sustain the Afghan National Security Forces, in addition to the \$500 million dollars budgeted annually by the Afghan government, to help the ANSF continue the fight against armed insurgency and terrorism.

And in Tokyo, the international community pledged an additional \$16 billion dollars in civilian assistance to help rebuild a country ravished by war. These are among the most substantial levels of aid ever committed to any country.

The international community’s financial and political commitment stands out as a defining difference between 2014 and 1989. The United States, and nations across the globe, have unambiguously committed to Afghanistan’s future.

Transition Strategy

In his State of the Union address, President Obama laid out the core steps necessary to complete the transition in to a sovereign, unified Afghanistan.

The first step, the transition to Afghan responsibility for security, is well under way. Afghans soldiers are now leading roughly 90 percent of all operations. Thousands of our soldiers have returned home from Afghanistan and by this time next year another 34,000 U.S. troops will return home. They will be removed in a phased approach over the next year, managed by the Commander on the ground and the military chain of command.

As our mission changes and Afghan forces grow in capability and experience, international troops will continue to train, advise, assist the Afghans, and fight alongside them when needed. In that capacity, we will no longer be leading combat operations, but instead shift to a supporting role as Afghans have demonstrated their increasing capability to lead combat operations across the country.

In fact, during President Karzai's visit to Washington in January, President Obama welcomed the Afghans' desire to be in the lead for security across Afghanistan this spring.

The second step – the United States and ISAF continue a robust training effort that has resulted in a surge in the number of ANSF troops available to take on security responsibilities.

As of February 2013, the Afghan National Security Forces strength was 352,000, almost doubling in size since November 2009. The commitments made by the international community in Chicago in May 2012 will support a strong and sustainable long-term Afghan force.

Third, we are building an enduring partnership with Afghanistan – one codified in strategic agreements and underpinned by joint commitments to combat terrorism, strengthen democratic institutions, and advance the development, dignity, and rights of all Afghans.

Quoting President Obama, “We are building an enduring partnership with Afghanistan, as (Afghanistan) stands up, (it) will not stand alone.” We greatly appreciate the steps Pakistan has taken in recent months to strengthen its relationship with Kabul and support a more secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan within a secure, stable and prosperous region.

Fourth, we are building a global consensus to support peace and stability in South Asia. As President Obama has stated, we believe Pakistan can and should be an equal partner in this process in a way that respects Pakistan's sovereignty, interests, and democratic institutions.

Reconciliation

Fifth, and most salient at this moment, we must work together with purpose to facilitate a negotiated peace in Afghanistan. As President Obama and President Karzai agreed in Washington, Afghan-led peace and reconciliation is the surest way to end violence and ensure the lasting stability of Afghanistan and the region.

The U.S. role is to help advance such a process, including by supporting an office in Qatar, where negotiations can take place between the Afghan High Peace Council and authorized representatives of the Taliban.

The end result of any process must be that the Taliban end violence, break ties with Al Qaeda, and accept Afghanistan's constitution, including provisions that protect the rights of all citizens including women and minorities. If this happens, we believe the Taliban can be a part of Afghanistan's future.

This must be an Afghan-led peace process, with Afghans talking to Afghans to find a way forward for their country. But there is much that the United States and Pakistan can do to support this effort.

Pakistan's role in promoting peace in Afghanistan

For Pakistan, supporting progress toward peace in Afghanistan is not a matter of altruism, but is instead a critical sovereign interest. I need only cite your civilian and military leaders who have stated clearly and repeatedly that continued violence and increased instability in Afghanistan equates to increased instability and violence in Pakistan. We agree and are acutely aware of that nexus.

Sustainable peace in Afghanistan is not only good for Afghanistan, but offers the promise of significant dividends for regional development. We are encouraged by the growing scope of engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan and hope we can work together to advance a common vision for peace and prosperity in Pakistan and across the region.

Conclusion – Here to Stay

In conclusion, let me reiterate that the United States will remain committed to ensuring a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. And we will continue to view the U.S.-Pakistan partnership as one of critical and growing importance. We will also maintain cooperation with Pakistan in our joint efforts to counter extremism, combat terrorism, and protect both our peoples from the scourge of senseless violence.

There is much more to be said about all that we can do together. We have a chance to decide together how to capitalize on the opportunities before us. Thank you for your attention.